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ABSTRACT

The implications of the spirituality of South Asian women for adult learning were examined through semistructured interviews of five South Asian women who resided in Canada. The women, who included students, working professionals, mothers, and single women, originated from Nepal, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka and were from Hindu, Moslem, and Buddhist backgrounds. Each interview lasted 30-60 minutes. Lack of clarity regarding the terms "spirituality" and "religion" was a common theme in all five interviews; however, all five women shared a common understanding of what religion entails. Times of struggle served as stimulus for many of the women to reflect on their spiritual practices, and many of the women described their spirituality as a source of personal strength. All five women's perspectives on and views of spirituality were holistic in nature. The women's views were discussed in the context of Western developmental theories, including Kohlberg's theory of moral development, current feminist spirituality literature, transformative learning theory, and contemporary adult education practices. Adult educators in Canada were advised to increase their awareness of South Asian cultures and affirm and allow for their community orientation to meet South Asian women's needs in formal adult education classrooms. (Contains 31 references.) (MN)

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# Spirituality of South Asian Women: Implications for Adult Learning

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**Spirituality of South Asian Women: Implications for Adult Learning**

Spirituality is an involved and complex notion. While formal religious institutions in the West are suffering from reduced attendance and public support, spirituality enjoys increasing interest. According to Westerhoff and Eusden (1982), "wherever we look, we discover persons on a journey toward a consciousness in which subjective, depth experiences are as important as objective, empirically measurable, rational explanations" (p.3). People are becoming increasingly aware that "there is something missing in their lives." Remarkably, many Westerners are drawn to eastern religions and spiritual traditions to address this need. Christianity, according to some religious writers, leaves many unsatisfied as it is primarily concerned with belief in doctrines while Eastern religions address states of mind. "The wisdom of the East has a strictly practical aim which is not mere knowledge *about* the universe; it aims at a transformation of the individual and of his feeling through experience rather than belief" (Watts, 1968, p. 140).

Clearly, spirituality can be a powerful influence in people's lives. As a type of informal learning, it gives perspective to how they see the world and themselves in relation to it. As these perspectives can also shape their approach to learning, spirituality is an important area of study for adult educators (MacKeracher, 1996). Merriam and Caffarella (1991) provide sound words for the importance of increasing our understanding of spirituality and its impact on learning. "The more we know about adult learners, the changes they go through, and how these changes motivate and interact with learning, the better we can structure learning experiences that both respond and stimulate development" (p. 35). Miller and Drake (1997) express concerns, however, that educators avoid the word spiritual. "It makes them uncomfortable....We focus on outcomes rather than have students explore the fundamental questions of life...we cover material and solve problems. We fiddle, while Rome burns"(p.239).

Understanding spiritual perspectives of people who originate from Asian countries is particularly key as religious and spiritual practices are the central to many Asian cultures. In these times of increasing diversity in adult education classrooms, a clear understanding of Eastern spirituality and its impact on learning is necessary to best address the needs of Asian students and would deepen understanding of its attraction for Western students. Existing adult education and spiritual development theories present primarily a Western perspective. Literature documenting

spirituality of Asian people and its relationship to their learning is noticeably scarce. There is a particular silence with regards to spirituality as an avenue of adult learning for women of Asia. This study acknowledges and addresses that silence. The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of the spirituality of South Asian women. In particular, it queries spirituality's influence on how they experience and make meaning of the world and approach learning.

## Relationship to Existing Research and Literature

A broad and diverse review of the literature is necessary to inform this study. Relevant research emerges from adult education, developmental psychology, religion and feminist fields. In order to gain a deeper understanding of spirituality, it is necessary to address the relationship between spirituality and formal religion and the potential impact on learning perspectives.

### Spirituality and Religion

In the West, the terms spirituality and religion almost exist independently; it is almost "fashionable" to say that one is spiritual but not religious. According to Hague (1995), "spirituality may find expression in religion; religion at its best will be deeply spiritual, but spirituality is quite distinct from organizational religion" (p. 13). While religion tends to focus on belief, rituals and practice and is often culturally based, spirituality centers on personal experience. It not only gives a distant vision of the "more" beyond, but requires "acts of knowing, constructing and composing by individuals" in order to understand their relationship to that which is greater than themselves (Fowler, 1981, p. 24). In doing so, spirituality provides a relative perspective of the here and now and encourages exploration of values and ultimate concerns. These inform and direct our way of "being in and understanding the world"(Hague, 1995). Studies from Asian cultures do not differentiate between the terms "religion" and "spirituality" but clearly demonstrate that religious practices influence world and learning perspectives as much if not more than in the West.

Much of the literature describes seeking or finding meaning as a primary purpose for spiritual seekers which is also recognized as an essential purpose of liberal adult education traditions (Merriam, 1995). Fowler, stated that "we are concerned with how to put our lives together and with what will make life worth living" (1981, p. 4). This is also common of the feminist perspective provided by King (1992) who stated that "our spiritual quest is the basic human search for the ultimate meaning of existence" (p.15). Key also to spirituality are the opportunities afforded for self

discovery. According to Fowler (1978), "faith is a primary motivating power in the journey of the self" (p. 25). "It is the continuing discovery of our real nature, the wisdom of self-understanding and the reach for truth beyond our current grasp" (p.15).

**Spirituality and Adult Education**

With spirituality's potentially profound impact on how one makes sense of the world and finds personal meaning, and opportunities for increases self-understanding, it echoes goals of formal adult education settings and thus is a viable and valuable form of informal adult learning. There is increasing interest in and support for less formal education activities in the discipline of adult education. Courtney (cited in Merriam & Cunningham, 1989) noted the recent tendency in the field "to substitute the term adult learning for adult education, as if to reflect the growing interest of the field of learning, however unorganized, episodic, or experiential, beyond the classroom" (p.19). According to Thomas (1991), "...education cannot exist without learning. Learning, however, not only can exist outside the context of education but is probably most frequently found there"(p. 17).

**Spirituality and Adult Developmental Theory**

Existing adult developmental theories which can inform our understanding of spirituality have primarily been written from a Western orientation and typically represent white, middle-class and usually male perspectives (Merriam & Brockett, 1997). The development of moral reasoning and faith have been discussed in theories by Kohlberg (1983) and Fowler (1981). These both reflect a gradual decentering process where the individual shifts from a "self" focus to a focus on "others" and that which is beyond oneself. Fowler extended Kohlberg's moral reasoning theory and created a six stage faith development theory which Bee (1996) claims might be called "a theory of development of meaning systems" (p. 339). The first of the adult forms of faith, *synthetic-conventional faith*, is rooted in the assumption that authority is to be found outside of oneself. "Many adults remain within this form of faith/meaning throughout their lives, defining themselves and interpreting their experiences within the meaning system of some group or specific set of beliefs" (Bee, 1996, p. 340). The next stage is called *individuative-reflective faith* which requires "an interruption of reliance on external sources of authority....There must be a relocation of authority within the self" (Fowler, 1981, p. 179). At this stage, there is growth both of the self and of the person's world view. The next stage called *conjunctive faith* reflects a shift from an individual



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level to an interest in others and an acknowledgment that there are multiple truths allows far greater tolerance towards others. At stage five, which rarely emerges before mid-life, the individual moves beyond the dichotomizing which is typical of stage four. The final proposed stage which is rare is called *universalizing faith*. It represents a step beyond individuality where the person lives the principles of absolute love and justice.

**Spirituality and Transformative Learning**

Mezirow's transformation theory acknowledges that it is the way in which individuals make meaning of their experience that facilitates growth and learning. This learning involves critical reflection - questioning our assumptions and perspectives in order to transform our meaning perspectives (Merriam & Brockett, 1997). According to Brookfield (1987, p.10), "The critical approach to learning involves calling into question established knowledge and the assumptions which inform it." Brookfield also writes that "it is possible to argue that the unique function of adult learning is to bring into critical consciousness the assumptions and perspectives about knowledge and social processes learned uncritically in childhood and adolescence" (1995, p. 4).

**Spiritual Transcendence Theory**

According to Vardey, "to live in spiritual truth requires a deep commitment to the divine in ourselves and others and can lead to transcended states of awareness, of consciousness that unites the mind, the heart, and the soul. Spirituality is about being open to the different realities of existence, about being guided by our intuitions, which is nothing less than the truth within us" (1996, p. xv). Therefore, theories that describe the transcendent spiritual experience may also inform our perspectives. Wilbur (1986) describes nine levels of human development which occur before a person reaches the tenth or Ultimate level with oneness with the Universe. His first six levels are similar to those proposed by Piaget (Mackeracher, 1996). The levels reflect a gradual dissolving of the ego. "At the ninth level, the centralized self becomes subordinated, lost in the largeness of being and is finally abolished, replaced by a feeling of a boundless universal self, an unlimited consciousness of unity which pervades everything and everywhere" (p. 178).

**Women's Perspectives**

Perspectives on women's development have been provided by prominent female researchers including Gilligan (1982) and Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) and MacKeracher

(1996). Josselson (1992) stated that the findings call to question the traditional male models of adult development which focus on autonomy and independence. Research on women's development has consistently indicated that "human interconnection and relatedness are a central plot of human development" (MacKeracher, 1996, p. 123). Gilligan argued that sex differences exist in moral development and in personality development (1982). Gilligan proposed a "care model" as an alternative moral reasoning model to Kohlberg's theory. It focuses on concerns about being connected to others and the value of responsiveness to the needs of others. Gilligan (1990) found that while most men and women in her studies were able to use both models of moral reasoning, 66% of them focused on one model and only minimally represented the other. She also noted that the tendency to focus on one model was characteristic of both men and women but the care focus was almost exclusively a female phenomenon.

Belenky et al. discussed "women's way of knowing." They discuss perspectives of knowing that include the following: *silence*- which encompasses the feeling of being voiceless and subject to the whims of external authority, *received knowing* where knowledge comes from external sources, *subjective knowing* which comes from internal sources and is based on personal experience, feelings and intuitions, *procedural knowing* which involves reasoned reflection - to *constructed knowing* in which the women view themselves as creators of knowledge and they value both objective and subjective learning strategies (Merriam & Brockett, 1997).

**Spiritual Development Theory**

The motif of a spiritual journey is prevalent in spiritual development literature. The prominent theme involves taking a physical journey as exemplified by male historical religious figures including Christ and Siddhartha Gauthama (the Buddha.) Physical journeys were not commonly articulated in "The Feminine Face of God" by Anderson and Hopkins (1986). Interviews with women from many spiritual perspectives revealed that women did not typically include a pilgrimage component. If women did physically leave home, they did so after they made their connection with the sacred - not to initiate the connection. "Home leaving [geographically] seems to have been an auxiliary process, something that helped widen or deepen a channel already running through the woman's life...home leaving served to increase permeability to the divine in a life that had already opened to it" (Anderson & Hopkins, 1991, p.51). Women's spiritual quests appeared to

more internal in nature.

Primary differences may also exist between eastern and western spiritual journeys according to Campbell (cited in Groff & Smoker, 1996). In the East, where a group identity and culture are more dominant, one is expected to follow the path set before by one's guru or spiritual teacher. In the West, where individual identity and culture are more dominant, seekers are freer to embark on their journeys and engage in experiences of their own choosing.

The beginning phase of the a journey is often triggered by a sense of emptiness or "nothingness" as it is labeled by Christ (1986). According to Joseph Campbell, there is a sense that "the familiar life horizon has been outgrown: the old concepts, ideals and emotional patterns no longer fit; the time for the passing of a threshold is at hand" (1968, p.58).

People engaged in spirituality also commonly report times of disillusionment and struggle often termed the "dark nights of the soul." "Dark night" is a metaphor for the sense of emptiness felt by those who have broken their ties with conventional sources of value but have not yet discovered their grounding in new sources (Christ, 1986). According to one woman seeker, it is in the times of struggle "when you throw yourself into a situation where you have not got what it takes... [that you are able] to open up to God" (Anderson & Hopkins, 1991, p.50).

This often leads to a phase which Christ (1986) labels "awakening." During the awakening phase, the "powers of being" are revealed. Women often describe their awakening as a coming to self - a process of learning to trust the neglected or rejected parts of oneself - rather than a giving up of self. It is a grounding of selfhood in the powers of being, rather than a surrender to self to the powers of being" (Christ, 1986, p.19).

**Method and Data Source**

The aim of this research was to allow South Asian women to give "voice" to their spiritual experiences and reflect on their spirituality in connection with their own learning. The aim of the study was not to provide generalizable results but rather to present thick descriptions of compelling stories to increase the likelihood that readers will relate insights from the stories to their own experiences.

This study involved a narrative inquiry method as it used stories as a medium for understanding human experience. According to Clandinin (1990), "one theory of educational

research holds that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives" (p. 2). The study of narratives is the study of the ways humans experience the world. Narrative inquiry allows us to come to a deeper understanding of lived experience as it is represented and given meaning through personal stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). As it is not possible to avoid researcher bias in this study nor is it desirable to silence the researcher's voice, these qualitative methods were chosen as they require open acknowledgment and inclusion of my assumptions and convictions.

The participants in this study were five women who currently live in Canada. They originate from Nepal, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka and are from Hindu, Moslem and Buddhist backgrounds. They include students and working professionals, mothers and single women. Their common link is that they view their spirituality and spiritual practices to be important meaningful forces in their lives. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Each participant attended two or three interviews which were 30 to 60 minutes in length. The interviews were transcribed in entirety by myself in order to provide as rich a description as possible and to allow me an intimate knowledge of the data. The transcriptions were slightly amended since spoken language is commonly less coherent than when ideas are expressed in written text. As English is not the first language of any of the participants, grammar was corrected since this was essential for meaning. An inductive approach was used to analyze the data. This allowed the categories and themes to arise from the stories themselves. In order to enhance dependability, transcripts were shared with a colleague who provided feedback on early categories and appropriate revisions were made. In order to further enhance credibility and address ethical concerns, I shared interpretations of the initial interviews at the beginning of the second, and for some participants also on the third, interviews and incorporated their suggestions.

**Participants**

In order provide context for the findings discussed following, a brief review of the participants' backgrounds and cultures is necessary. There were three Hindu participants - Maya who is Nepalese and Sita and Taja who are both East Indian. All three were raised in families where formal religious rituals were taught and practiced by immediate and extended family members. Their practices, however, varied in nature. This is not surprising as Hinduism is a tremendously

complex religious system. According to Littleton (1996), "No human belief system is more complex or variegated than Hinduism; indeed, it has been said that there are perhaps as many "little" Hindu traditions as there are villages in India (around 3.2 million)" (p. 8).

Maya has lived with her husband and children in Canada for five years. She has lived most of her life in Kathmandu, Nepal where her extended family still reside. Maya's first language is Newari - the language of the indigenous peoples in the Kathmandu valley. She also speaks Nepali, the national language of Nepal and English. In Nepal and India, there is a social order or caste system. Duties are often delineated by caste. Maya married into the Joshi caste, which is the Newari equivalent to the Brahmin caste, the highest in the hierarchy. After her marriage, Maya performed religious rituals in Nepal along with her own female relatives and those through marriage. Maya continues to perform these rituals twice daily here in Canada.

Sita was raised in a small village in northeast India where she experienced a childhood replete with hardships including famine, disease, and violence. Sita credits God for protecting her and ensuring her survival. Sita has lived now in Canada for over 20 years and is a mother and grandmother. Now in her sixties, she talks of being percieved as "only a housewife" and the struggles of giving up her former identity which was grounded in a professional career in India. Sita is known locally as someone well versed in Eastern women's spirituality. Sita has learned to read Sanskirt (an uncommon opportunity for an Asian woman) and therefore has personal access to the ancient Hindu religious texts. In times of difficulty, Sita regains her strength through reading Hindu and other sacred writing.

Taja was born in a southern India city and learned to speak Tamil and Hindi before English. Raised in Bombay by her mother and extended family, the influence of her grandparents on her beliefs is evident in her early Hindu religious memories. She has lived over 25 years in Canada and is active in a full-time career, volunteer commitments and responsibilities of being a wife and mother. Ten years ago, Taja began to follow the teachings of Satya Sai Baba - an Indian spiritual leader believed to be a human manifestation of all gods. Taja's spiritual practice involves singing *Bhajan* - Sai Baba devotional songs and attending events at the Tai temple. At the time of the interviews, she was also planning to begin a regular mediation practice.

Lotus is a practicing Therevaden Buddhist. She was raised in a southern Sri Lankan town

and remembers completing Buddhist rituals from a young age. Now in Canada for 15 years where she is a wife and mother, Buddhist philosophies guide her life. Taja meditates daily and follows the teachings and devotions provided by a Sri Lankan Buddhist teacher who is a monk in the Theravaden tradition.

Ridha is a Shiite Muslim woman who has lived in Canada for four years. She was raised in a relatively wealthy extended family (her father remarried four times) which was according to Ridha not overly conservative nor liberal, and has lived most of her life in the Punjab province of Pakistan. She speaks Punjabi as well as English fluently. Ridha has graduate level education from Pakistan - the only sister of four to have attended university and to be unmarried. This is remarkable for in her culture, women Ridha's age (mid-30's) have typically long since "settled down" and had children. Ridha regularly attends local Shiite ceremonies.

## Findings

Since this study is "a work in progress," the analyses are not yet complete and the results offered presently are tentative and incomplete. The following findings have emerged from the data analyzed to date.

### Spirituality and Religion - A Confusion of Terms

A theme common to all the participants was the lack of clarity regarding the terms "spirituality" and "religion." They did not share a common understanding of the terms. The terms were confusing and ambiguous to two of the participants yet were clear and descriptive to the remaining three. Maya's confusion was apparent during our first interview when she asked *"Spirituality - is it something related to religion or is it different from that?"* Spirituality appeared to be a word not used in Nepal. An equivalent word does not exist in Newari, her mother tongue or Nepali, her second language. Lotus - the Buddhist participant from Sri Lanka - also did not draw clear distinctions between the terms. *" Spirituality and religion. This is how I see it as a Buddhist....Buddhism actually is ...I can't say it's a religion. It is a way of life to me...It's a philosophy. So I see it's the same....Spirituality means religion to me.".*

The remaining participants saw clear distinctions between spirituality and religion. Sita, Ridha and Taja viewed spirituality as an extension of their formal religious experiences. For them their spiritual practices were deeply personal in nature. Sita's faith in god, she recounted, is



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what gives her strength. Her spiritual identity, however, is what gives her a sense of and confidence in her personal worth. According to Sita, her spirituality is quite different than her religion. Her spirituality, which is more personal, developed as an extension of her religious practices.

> *Unless the field is properly prepared, you can't put a seed in it - it will not germinate, it will not grow. Similarly, in the first part of any spiritual journey, the body and mind need that kind of preparation and that is what religion tells us to do - how to live an ethical life - a moral life - how to restrain our senses - how to put some order and discipline, but these rules, regulations, disciplines, instructions, becoming moral is a way. It is a preparation for spiritual life... so it is step by step. My spirituality...it is grounded in religion and religion has been a stepping stone. Spirituality evolved gradually. Without that stepping stone, I would not have been able to come so far.*

Those that clearly defined spirituality as separate from religion appeared also more comfortable with the journey metaphor. The idea of journey resonated with Sita and Taja who were both raised as Hindu with beliefs in reincarnation and multiple births.

**Religion is Rooted in Ritual**

In lieu of the confusion regarding spirituality and religion, it was surprising to find that the participants shared a common understanding of what religion entailed. Religion was rooted in ritual practices which are integrally connected to culture and taught in childhood through familial traditions. The meaning of the rituals was typically defined culturally rather than personally. The importance of religion in Nepali culture, the multiple gods and the women's roles and expectations in carrying on tradition were clearly articulated by Maya.

> *And in Nepal, every house, they have the structure [statue] of god and goddess... everybody has those things.....We have **Saraswati** [goddess of music], **Lakshmi** [goddess of wealth]...there are various names. And in terms of gods, we have **Ganesh** [elephant god], **Krishnaji** , **Shiva** [the destroyer god]....And early in the morning, the elder of the house, like my mom, she used to worship and in my husband's home, her mom used to worship....After I got married, I just do **pranam** [short pujaa] for a couple of years. Then, my grandmother-in-law got sick....My mother-in-law - she has feet problem- so that responsibility fell on me...I started to do **pujaa garnu** daily.*

Maya has lived in Canada for five years with her husband and children. Each morning - she performs a *pujaa* which is a ceremonial dinner offered to the gods. In the evenings, she does *ariti* - which involves lighting candles in reverence to the gods. This rituals remain very important to her.

As Maya said *"I haven't missed any single day, you know."* When I asked Maya about the meanings of the rituals, the question seemed foreign to her.

*Jody: Tell me what you think about when you do this* ***pujaa*** *[ceremonial dinner offered to the God].*

*Maya: First of all, it's a continuation of culture. We are told that we have to do. The reason behind that, still I have to know by myself....Everything has its meaning in our culture but even I don't know the meaning of all those things.*

*Jody: So, you mainly do it because of culture.*

*Maya: Because of culture, we have to do this.*

*Jody: Evening too? W hat's the meaning behind burning the "***bhatti***? [homemade candle]*

*Maya: The* ***bhatti****...it has very good meaning. Something like...****bhatti*** *is bright - it gives off light. I don't really know about this a lot.*

*Jody: But, I want to know why you do it. So the thing you did in Nepal, it's mostly a cultural thing?*

*Maya: Culture things...like "have to do" thing. It has been doing many many ...years. We have to do this.*

The meaning of completing these rituals lies in Maya defining and affirming herself as a Nepali woman within her culture. As Maya recounted during the second interview: *"I will do that as long as I can move my two hands...because I am Nepali woman and I want to continue that culture."*

Religious events, where rituals were performed, were commonly communal in nature and also served important social functions. This was apparent in all the women's stories and well articulated by Ridha.

*Ridha: ...I'm from Shiite sect and we have every year, this sort of ceremonies - religious ceremonies. And I think it's a big impact on every person if he takes really seriously. Because it's not something like you are imposed...it's a social gathering also so we don't take it as you have to go to church and sit down silently there and that sort of stuff. It's a sort of socialization; it's sort of function ; it's sort of tradition; there are so many other sort of stuff going on - it's sort of rituals - that's why I'm saying it's really hard to separate religion and rituals apart.*

*Jody: And...how do you find meaning in participating in those functions?*

*Ridha: ... I find meaning because I don't think they are telling something which you don't want to listen or they are boring to you. It has a lot of stuff in it....There is socialization there... there is so many sort of interesting rituals there - traditions there. You are not imposed to do something. It comes gradually...*

The importance of community spiritual practices was also echoed by Sita.

*When I was about say eight years old - like most girls, I was asked to keep fast on certain religious festivity days - or feast days of particular deity. Most girls at my age have two aims,one, to have a*



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*loving husband and, two, children who will make you proud - that is why they do undertake the vows. So I took a vow of doing it for 12 years...So after age 20, I didn't do it anymore. I must tell you, neither I resented it because I enjoy the joyous aspect because our religion is very much into celebration. Most of the time, it ends always in a big get together and eating together...and I like the company of women. The women usually in my part of India when they worship do not engage a priest. They worship directly. Most of our celebrations are communal. There is an instruction that you have to invite others like your neighbors, relatives, your friends to celebrate any religious event. Women will do their daily worship alone but in any festival days - any celebration - always we have to have other people so that we can worship together.*

A common theme resonated by the Hindu and Muslim participants was their willingness if not eagerness to take part in rituals in their respective communities. While most reported their participation as expected, they also were clear that it was their choice to participate.

**Re-evaluation of Religious Practices**

Times of great struggle were the stimulus for many of the participants to reflect on their spiritual practices. For many of the participants, a renewal and re-evaluation of their religious practices occurred when they arrived in Canada. Overwhelmed with a new culture and new roles, some including Maya, relied on ritual practice to connect them with their cultures of origin. While Lotus had always actively practiced Buddhism in her native Sri Lanka, it was not until she came to Canada that she began to study her religion.

*Lotus: What happened is ...Actually in Canada, we don't have anybody else. Just ourselves. Me, my husband and our two children. All our roots are back home. And that separation was really hard on me - even now. So, I was so upset for a long time....We were having a hard time; I still remember. We lost our family members - my mother - his mother - my grandmother. We couldn't attend to any of those things. I think any religion is promoting people to help their families - their brothers and sisters - parents when they are old. But I couldn't do any of those things. So I was always like regretting for those things - being away from them ....Then I was thinking...I should find a way...there must be something...Buddha must have said something about these things....So things like that triggered me to think about like - how can I live a happy life here? And I thought, I should improve my spiritual life - not only this material life, and see whether there is an answer for my question. Then I started reading about Buddhism....That's what triggered for me to learn about Buddhism a bit more deeper.*

*Jody: So until that point, did you have a sense that it was just ritual or it was just...?*

*Lotus: Yeah. I had something like that because I wasn't practicing Buddhism; I can tell*

*you the truth. I was a Buddhist thinking the rituals are Buddhism. But it is not. I understand that now. Being born as a Buddhist, I didn't know much. All the rituals were Buddhism to me when I was small. Like I thought, we were born in a Buddhist family - to worship - go to the temple - worship Buddha....When I came over here only, I started reading about Buddhism and learning about Buddhism. But when you read and when you have a deeper understanding of Buddhism, they are not rules and regulations made for you... But it is a philosophy - a way of life....If somebody can live according to that, somebody can have a good life in this life. And if you believe in rebirth that I don't trust much, you will have a good life after death too.*

**Spirituality - Avenue to personal learning and meaning, sense of identity and worth**

Many of the participants described their spirituality as a source of personal strength. Sita described her spirituality as the source of her self-worth. During our second interview, Sita clarified this for me.

*Jody: Your spirituality...helps you know who you are?*
*Sita: Yes. It helps me to know who I am. ...Well, you see, I have a physical identity of course that I'm a short person with dark skin - have such hair - such face - whatever it is. So that is my physical identity. Then, my social identity. I am somebody's daughter, somebody's wife, somebody's mother. Then, what I have acquired intellectually. That I have acquired that education - a house, so much money....But is that all I am?....I don't think this is all I am. So I am something more. That is spiritual identity and that's what always make me feel very comfortable with anybody....My spirituality tells me that just simply that I am a worthwhile person.*

Ridha's recognition of her own spirituality stemmed during a time of crisis while she was still living in Pakistan. Her hopes to marry a Pakistani man who was of Sunni background were not acceptable to her Shiite family. This was particularly true of her eldest brother who in lieu of her father's death, had assumed the primary decision-making role in her family. Her family had chosen another husband for her. Ridha tells of her difficult time through the following:

*...My friends come from Lahore and everybody can see that I am not happy...(But) I didn't find enough courage.....It was a family affair - such a big family affair. For me to come up with "no," it need really a lot of courage and you have to prepare for the consequences also. So I kept quiet. Anyway, so I got engaged the next day.*

Ridha began to read the Koran (the Muslim holy text) daily. As with other participants, in discovering her spriritualiy, she did not reject her culture and religion, but rather sought a deeper and personal connection with her beliefs for a source of strength.

All of the Hindu and Buddhist participants described seeking and affirming a personal

connection with a God or "other" as central to their spirituality and making meaning in the world. This often involved locating the sense of control outside of themselves. Many felt that meaning was found in formal religious teachings and sought guidance of religious teachers.

Taja's spirituality, which is rooted outside herself in the form of Sai Baba, gives her a tremendous sense of comfort and support. Sai Baba teaches "Take one step forward, I shall take a hundred towards you; shed one tear, I will wipe a hundred from your eyes" (cited in Mason & Laing, 1987, p. 1). Her perception and choice is for Sai Baba to be in control. *"He is the puppeteer; we are the puppets and he pulls our strings. And it's amazing how he does it. And only experiences can teach you that he really is in control and you are not in control....*Yet, while Sai Baba is the ultimate control, Taja maintains that she has the "discriminating power." *"He teaches you all the good things. He shows you the way. He gives you all the tools, How do you use them? He gives you the discriminating power."*

*Jody: How does it feel knowing that he's in control?*
*Taja: It feels good because when you surrender to him - your surrender yourself - he knows what you need and he gives it to you. Sometimes, you don't like what he gives, but if you take it in the right way, you get more than what you ever asked for....Today, if I am smiling...I feel very light in my heart, it is because I have somebody to fall back on. He is a pillar; he is a wall. He is the basis of my life and he is the one who is constant."*

It is important to note that the women's perspectives and views of spirituality were holistic in nature. Only those that had lived in Canada for some time including Sita and Taja were comfortable analyzing how they learned and how their religious perspectives impacted their learning. To some of the participants, may questions regarding personal growth and learning made little sense. When asked about how their spirituality impacted their learning, they often referred to formal religious teachings.

## Reflections on the Findings: A Conversation with the Literature

### Some thoughts on developmental theory: The "change bias"

Developmental theories presenting a Western perspective share a common assumption - that "growth" which involves change is inherently positive and desirable. As the primary researcher, I share this bias. Even our figures of speech such as "stuck in a rut" illuminate our underlying premise that we need to keep evolving and must not stand still. There is merit in this philosophy as

demonstrated by Bateson (1990) who discusses damage that is caused through dependence on continuity.

> All too often, men and women are like battered wives or abused children. We hold on to the continuity we have, however profoundly it is flawed. If change were less frightening, if the risks did not seem so great, far more could be lived. One of the striking facts of most lives is the recurrence of threads of continuity, the re-echoing of earlier themes, even across deep rifts of change, but when you watch people damaged by their dependence on continuity, you wonder about the nature of commitment, about the need for a new and more fluid way to imagine the future (p. 8).

We need to be cautious, however, when we are discussing development in other cultures. Does our growth assumption apply to other cultures? How is development viewed in the eyes of another culture? What is culturally valued?

Another caution regarding theory is found in the words of Wilber (1986), "When the only tool you have is a hammer, everything starts to look like a nail"(p.12). As with statistics or other research tools including existing theory, we must be cautious not to unintentionally (nor intentionally) manipulate the data to "fit" or show what we would like. Particularly in the case of developmental, learning and spiritual development theories which primarily represent a Western perspective, we may be tempted to mold the data to fit within their confines for lack of existing culturally sensitive theory.

Daloz encourages us to view theory as possible "maps" of development which we may or may not choose to use as a guide.

> ...good maps also offer choice; they are not mere formulas. And while developmental theories do imply direction, none insists that the journey can be taken in only one way or, indeed, that it be completed at all. Just as a map frames the setting for a journey, so does a developmental theory offer a contest for growth. It indicated landmarks , points our dangers, suggests possible routes and destinations, but leaves the walking to us." (Daloz, 1986, p. 46).

**Informing Moral and Faith Theory**

Does Kohlberg's moral development theory inform the women's stories? His three stages of

moral reasoning - *preconventional, conventional* and *principled* reflect a process of "decentering." The women in this study all come form South Asian cultures where the community is apparently more the primary focus than the self. Several of the women, Ridha, Taja, and Sita, actually showed a movement inward towards themselves. They needed to sense the presence of and their faith in the divine within themselves before they could shift outward. The Hindi greeting "Namaskar" which means "I salute the God in you" shows the religion's encouragement to see divine within oneself and others. After connecting internally, several of the women talked of Hindu and Buddhist teachings which encourage the dissolvement of the self and recognition of the "oneness of the universe." This perspective seems to resonate with Kohlberg's hypothesized final stage which results in the individual sensing the unity of the universe of which he or she is just one element.

It is apparent that Gilligan's care model illuminates the women's stories more as it represents development from a relational perspective (1982, 1990). Its focus involves being connected to others and responsive to the needs of others. Issues of detachment and abandonment are key moral issues. These same issues were described by many of the participants who articulated that they continued to do religious practices in order to stay connected to their cultural heritage.

Fowler's faith development theory discusses *synthetic-conventional faith* where the assumption of authority rooted outside of oneself and then *individuative-reflective faith* where the authority is relocated within the self. These two stages appear to apply to many of the participants. It begs the question why an either/or dichotomy is necessary. With a strong connection and sense of self rooted in an external community, it seems that it would be unwise and likely impossible to locate all authority within oneself. It is interesting that Fowler's next stage *conjunctive faith* reflects a shift from an individual level to an interest in others and an acknowledgment that there are multiple truths. This is taught in both Buddhist and Hindu teachings. According to Sita, "There are many paths to God."

**Informing spirituality theory**

A marked difference between the findings and current feminist spirituality literature, however, was that all the participants did not unilaterally draw clear distinctions between the terms "religion" and "spirituality." The Western tendency as documented in educational psychology literature (Hague, 1995) and in feminist spirituality literature (Christ, 1986) to assume that "religion"

related to formal traditions and "spirituality" was something more personal and distinct did not appear to be common to these women. Indeed, those that determined a distinction between the two terms, did describe an intensely personal experience but this was not divorced from but rather in addition to their formal religious practices and cultural heritage. As opposed to removing themselves or perhaps divorcing themselves from their religious roots, their spirituality involved a re-examination of their roots and offered new insights for them to continue to live within their established traditions.

It could be posited that perhaps the distinction between spirituality and religion was a function of the length of time the women had lived in Canada away from their home countries. The two participants (Sita and Taja) who had lived over 20 years in Canada noted a distinction while Maya - a relative newcomer to Canada at five years did not find the word "spirituality" meaningful. A distinction was not apparent, however, for Lotus who had lived here for over 15 years, while Ridha who has only been in Canada four years saw marked differences.

> To a woman, spirituality, or a life of the Spirit, implies relationship in its very essence...relationship to God in those intangible, fleeting moments when she is aware of a presence, whether it be in the sudden impact of a white cherry tree in blossom, or the rhythmical furrows of a plowed field; whether it be in a moment of unforgettable union with another human being or alone in the stillness of her own silence. Wherever it may happen there is for her always relationship. (Anderson & Hopkins, 1991, p. 87)

Sita, Ridha and Taja all spoke of a relationship with greater power as was noted by Anderson and Hopkins (1991) in their exploration of Western women's spirituality. An increased sense of self and connection to the divine within was also reported by the three women who differentiated between the two terms. According to one Western woman seeker, it is in the times of struggle "when you throw yourself into a situation where you have not got what it takes... [that you are able] to open up to God" (Anderson & Hopkins, 1991, p.50). As opposed to a sense of not having what it takes and a relenting of oneself, Ridha redefined her connection with God when she found strength within herself and asked "*What gives me this strength*?"

"Awakening" did also appear in the stories of the participants but in a different way than found women's spirituality literature written from a Western perspective. According to Western

literature, women often go through a period of emptiness after having broken their ties with conventional sources of value but not yet discovering their grounding in new sources (Christ, 1986).

While the Eastern women in this study did go through periods of struggle, they did not entirely release their ties with their traditional religious cultures. In Ridha's struggle with cultural expectations, she did not give up her religious beliefs nor find that she could no longer "fit the old mold." Ridha discovered her spirituality as she found a way to redefine herself in order to stay within her culture.

**Informing Transformative Learning Theory**

Several of the participants actively engaged in self reflection. They did not, appear, however to critically or rationally reflect on their spiritual practices or cultural conditions. Merriam and Brockett (1997) state that critical reflection involves questioning our assumptions and perspectives in order to transform our meaning perspectives. Brookfield also writes that "it is possible to argue that the unique function of adult learning is to bring into critical consciousness the assumptions and perspectives about knowledge and social processes learned uncritically in childhood and adolescence" (1995, p. 4). Why did the women not appear to engage in critical reflection? From a Western perspective, the apparent inferior status of these women relative to males, merits, if not begs, serious critical reflection - "calling into question established knowledge and the assumptions which inform it" (Brookfield, 1987)

Religious writings were a primary area where male dominance was apparent. Only two of the woman had access to sacred texts written in languages they could understand. The others were taught through the interpretations provided largely by male priests. According to Crites (1986), women do appear in the texts of men but only in roles defined by men. The influential Hindu mythical stories, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, indeed provided idealized interpretations of women with the primary roles of wife and mother. Crites (1986) calls for women to write their own stories.

> Without stories, she cannot understand herself. Without stories, she is alienated from those deeper experiences of self and world that have been called spiritual or religious. She is closed in silence. The expressions of women's spiritual quest is integrally related to the telling of women's stories. If women's stories are not told, the depth of women's souls will not be known. (p. 1)

Sita expressed appreciation that she learned to read Sanskrit and thus could access and interpret the sacred Vedic texts herself. The other Hindu participants, nor Ridha, the Muslim participant expressed frustration that they had to be reliant on male interpretations.

In fact, as opposed to critically and rationally analyzing the oppressive patriarchal forces that were in inherent in her upbringing and current life story, Ridha accepted them and found new ways to live within the traditional structure. Certainly, Ridha noted the potential oddity of this perspective from a Western viewpoint, as a she said,

> *If you hear my story, you will say...she is a victim of chauvinism or male dominance... Anybody can say 'we think you have no rights.' At this point, if I want to think like that, ...I can come up to that conclusion... But...I really don't condemn. I am not frustrated.*

**Informing adult education practices**

How might our increased awareness of the spiritual growth and practices of the five South Asian participants impact formal adult education classes? In current adult education practices, self-directed learning is central. Is self-directed learning - the current focus of adult education instruction - the most appropriate method of instruction based on the information gained from the participants? In order to discuss the research findings in light of formal adult education practices, key principles necessary to optimize adult learning as outlined by Canadian adult educator will be presented. According to MacKeracher, adults will learn best "when they are treated in ways which are consistent with their existing descriptions of who they are and what they are capable of doing" (1996, p.28). In order to discover the students' descriptions of who they are, Daloz reminds us to be sensitive to the "whole student."

> We can listen to our student's stories, seeking to understand how their quest for education fits into the larger questions and movement of their lives;...we can sense the whole lives of our students, recognizing how the aspirations, relationships, and values of their lives hold them in a web of forces enhancing or inhibiting their movement (1986, xviii).

In the telling of all the participants' stories of their spirituality, the tremendous impact and influence of their culture on their senses of identity was unmistakable. All of the women defined themselves, at least in part, in terms of their religions and cultures. As according Maya, she

completes religious rituals because she is a Nepali woman. *"As long as I have hands, I will do."* My own tendency to analyze and to not view holistically showed in my question to Ridha "Are you able or would you want to separate yourself from your Muslim culture? To this, she replied "Why would I?" to which I had no reply.

According to Hall (1976), "we are our culture - who we think we are is constrained by what our culture encourages us to think we are. Any possibilities beyond these constraints normally lie beyond our conscious awareness and perception"(p. 260). Even our retelling of our stories is impacted by our cultures. "Even for the recent past and in situations where there would seem to be little motivation for distortion, memories are modified and details supplied to fit cultural expectations" (Bateson, 1990, p. 32). It is possible that the participants' stories also were impacted by cultural expectations.

MacKeracher (1996) also states that adults learn best when the learning has relevance for the student based on current needs and meanings and when they feel respected in acknowledged. Discussing and determining what learning and knowledge is culturally relevant and valued is a way of disclosing relevance and also showing acknowledgment. Cultural expectations of types and methods of learning can clearly not be overlooked with Asian students. After all, "what one wants to learn, what is offered, and the ways in which one learns are determined to a large extent by the extent by the nature of the society at any particular point in time." (Merriam & Cunningham, 1991, p. 5) We may be tempted to say that they need to express their individuality which is encouraged in Western society and not be so controlled by a group. We may be too quick to assume that their lack of individual expression is a sign of fear or lack of courage.

> Fear is perhaps the greatest enemy of candor. How many men fear to follow their consciences because they would rather conform to the opinion of other men than to the truth they know in their souls? How can I be sincere if I am constantly changing my mind to conform with the shadow of what I think others expect of me? (Merton in Vardey, 1996, p. 57)

It behooves us to learn more about their cultural meanings and values as "culturally responsive teaching respects and incorporates the learner's deeper meaning to create joyful, absorbing, and challenging learning experiences" (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995, p.163). It is the

challenge then of adult educators to deliver course content in such a way that the "discourse acknowledges all voices - the multiple ways in which people interpret and reflect their understanding of the world " (p. 171).

MacKeracher (1996) also states that in order to optimize adult learning, the "learning must bear some relationship to past experience" (P. 28). It is clear that most of the participants' formal spiritual learning was centered on being taught by a guru. The authority of the teacher was sanctioned and maintained. In the West, however, many educators subscribe that "Many adults tend to have too much faith in the teacher's wisdom and omniscience, and too little faith in their own wisdom and experience" (Griffin, 1993, p. 111). This view has, in part, led to the importance of self-directed learning in the field. MacKeracher, however, cautions that "many writers imply that all adults value the 'role of the self-directed learner.' This belief has become part of the mythology of adult education; and as a myth, blinds us to the fact that some adults cannot, will not, or do not perform as self-directed learners" (1996, p. 57). In lieu of the Asian propensity for and comfort with direct teaching, it is likely that the mentor teacher-student relationship as discussed by Daloz (1986) may prove more suitable for Asian students.

MacKeracher states that self-direction is facilitated when learners are assisted in "learning how to learn." Two of the key characteristics involve developing self-reflection and critical reflection. As was noted earlier, several of the participants, including Ridha and Sita, actively engaged in self-reflection and were comfortable with this process. Critical reflection, however, was not common amongst the participants

According to MacKeracher, self -direction may be innate disposition but it can also be learned. This would involve Asian students increasing their comfort with conceiving and implementing their own goals and plans, and learning without a primarily teacher-directed focus. They would also need to enhance their rational critical thinking skills.

> Critical reflection, however, if it is transformative requires that the students, ...become able to identify the implicit and explicit assumptions that inform thought and action, to understand how these assumptions are culturally formed and transmitted, to investigate the accuracy and validity of these assumptions, and to take alternative perspectives on the thoughts and actions that these assumptions inform. (Brookfield, 1995, p.

4)

We need to question our assumption that critical thinking and analysis are essential or even desirable for all learners. What are we asking of South Asian women when we ask them critically reflect on their assumptions and perceptions? Brookfield notes the unrealized potential for critical reflection in many cultures. "Across the world people live lives in which the possibility for critical reflection remains unrealized, either through political oppression, apathy, poverty, or educational neglect" (Brookfield, 1995, p. 4). It leads us to the question, why do these women not critically reflect on their cultural assumptions?

A primary reason may be that in critically analyzing the patriarchal assumptions upon which their cultures are formed, the women risk being alienate from their cultures. Brookfield (1994) discussed the inherent difficulties of critical reflection. In a study of adult educators who engaged actively in critical reflection, "cultural suicide" was an impending threat. The learners perceived that if they critically questioned conventional assumptions, justifications, and structures too deeply, they risked being excluded from the cultures that had defined and sustained them up to that point their lives (Brookfield, 1994). Many of the participants, in fact, complained that "being critically reflective had only served to make them disliked by their colleagues, had harmed their careers, had lost them fledgling friends and professionally useful acquaintances, had threatened their livelihoods, and had turned them into institutional pariahs"(p. 209). As Brookfield's participants were operating in Western cultures where critical reflection is somewhat encouraged, it calls us to question what repercussions the women would face if they chose to outwardly question and criticize the norms and women's roles in their own cultures where critical reflection is not encouraged not perhaps acceptable. Do Asian women have more to lose in denying their traditional cultures than Western women where more significant headway and advances have already been made in women's roles and rights.

It appears that rational, critical reflection is not as valued in South Asian cultures as it is here in the West. Thus, our current educational programs representing models encouraging independence and rational thought may not best meet the students needs. Methods that emphasize the development of relatedness and connectness and value that facilitate intuitive learning may be more appropriate teaching and learning styles for Asian students.

**Impact of Western Adult Education Practices on Asian Students**

It is likely that Asian students will be affected when exposed to Western learning and teaching preferences and practices. They certainly will go through transitions involved with living in a new culture. When students are going through these transitions, Daloz encourages students and teachers to "discuss the important matters together so that our students can regain the courage, insight, and passion they will need to move ahead in their lives more fully, to weave and reweave the fabric of meaning more richly and strongly" (1986, p. 2). They need to integrate these new learnings within their cultural meaning systems which sustain them.

It is insightful and perhaps sobering for us to note that while many of the participants in this study had lived for many years and had even studied in Canada, their roots and much of their sense of themselves remained tied to their religious traditions. A similar finding was noted by Westerhoff and Eusden about Westerners who immerse in Eastern cultures. "We are what we are and, no matter how influential the journey, no matter how great the enlargement of our understanding about religion, we remain Western and Christian. We advocate a chance to look and compare and learn. But we are claimed by and we are always reappropriating Christian understandings and ways." (Westerhoff & Eusden, 1982, p. 8).

Spirituality was key to understanding the world by the participants in this study. Results imply that we need to increase our awareness of South Asian cultures, and affirm and allow for their community orientation to best meet their needs in formal adult education classrooms. While critical reflection remains important in the learning process, an appreciation for the intuitive as well as rational ways of learning and knowing is also necessary. Awareness that self-directed learning may not best meet the student's needs is also important.

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